

Forum: Safe Routes Athens has positive enviro, health implications

By John Kissane | | Story updated at 7:32 PM on Monday, July 23, 2007

A July 14 Associated Press story in the Athens Banner-Herald, "Fewer kids walking, biking to school," presents a bleak picture in which fewer and fewer American children get to school on foot or bicycle. A U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study is cited, indicating that over the past three decades the percentage of children walking and biking to school has fallen dramatically with a corresponding rise in car commuting. The American South reports the lowest rates of walking or biking to school, according to the study.

This information is not surprising, and, in fact, the CDC authored a similar report in 2000 indicating that walking and biking to school had dropped from 66 percent of all children in the late 1960s to 13 percent in 2000.

But while the July 14 piece is factual, it leaves a great deal untold. For one, the story fails to mention that children are less active in all aspects of their lives, and thus less healthy. Physical education is being phased out of our schools, and families have become more dependent on cars and SUVs as well as more inclined to consume fast food than to eat healthy meals at home. Childhood obesity rates have tripled over the past 30 years while asthma and diabetes, often brought on by lack of exercise in children, are seen in increasing numbers.

But steps are being taken nationally as well as locally to reverse these trends. A concept known as Safe Routes to School (SRTS) began in the 1970s in Denmark, primarily a result of concern for the safety of children walking and biking to school. During the 1980s SRTS spread internationally, and the first SRTS program in the United States was implemented in the Bronx, New York, in 1997.

In August 2000, the U.S. Congress funded two pilot SRTS projects through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Since that time, many grass-roots SRTS efforts have been organized, including one right here in Athens-Clarke County. These programs seek to promote physical activity among school-age children through education and the provision of infrastructure to enable them to walk or bicycle safely to school.

Safe Routes Athens was founded in 2005 as a program of BikeAthens and established a task force of community leaders - educators, planners, public health professionals, law enforcement personnel and business owners, among others - to oversee the effort. SRA also helped begin a pilot Safe Routes project at Barrow Elementary in 2005, and that fall the Barrow program took part in International Walk and Bicycle to School Day with more than half of the school's 418 students participating. Barrow has continued with organized monthly walk and bike to school days and other events to encourage walking and biking to school, and increasing numbers of kids walk and bike to school most days.

Safe Routes Athens has also enlisted community volunteers to work with the county's Transportation and Public Works Department to survey county streets and create much-needed sidewalk maps. A SRA-sponsored League of American Bicyclists seminar organized last summer resulted in eight certified instructors for bicycle education courses.

The implications of Safe Routes to School programs can be far-reaching. SRTS programs can improve safety, not just for children, but also for the entire community. These programs provide opportunities for people to become more physically active and rely less on motor vehicles. SRTS programs benefit the environment and quality of life by reducing traffic congestion and motor vehicle emissions.

We have made significant strides here with very limited financial resources and an entirely volunteer effort, but late this year a Safe Routes to School grant program administered by the Georgia Department of Transportation will begin accepting applications for funding in 2008. These grants initially will be limited to planning and education projects, but later, infrastructure work such as crosswalk improvements and sidewalk construction and repair will be funded as well. Provided some of the DOT grant funds come our way, individual schools in Athens-Clarke County will be able to develop SRTS plans specific to their situations and needs and then implement the plans with educational programs and much-needed infrastructure improvements.

Safe Routes Athens is now attempting to raise stopgap funds that will allow us to undertake planning and prepare grant applications for several schools in the Clarke County School District yet this year. It is our hope that, eventually, Safe Routes to School projects will be implemented at many, if not all, schools in our community. Tax-deductible donations may be sent to SRA at P.O. Box 344, Athens, GA 30603.

- Kissane is coordinator of Safe Routes Athens.